

Learning about Thanksgiving from the Psalms

The Pilgrims set sail for America on September 6, 1620, and for two months braved the harsh elements of a storm-tossed sea. Upon disembarking at Plymouth Rock, they held a prayer service and then hastily began building shelters. However, unprepared for such a harsh New England winter, nearly half of them died before spring. Emerging from that grueling winter, the Pilgrims were surprised when an Indian named Samoset approached them and greeted them in their own language. A week later, Samoset returned with a friend named Squanto, who lived with the Pilgrims and accepted their Christian faith. Squanto taught the Pilgrims much about how to live in the New World, and he and Samoset helped forge a long-lasting peace treaty between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians. Pilgrim Governor William Bradford described Squanto as “a special instrument sent of God for [our] good.”

That summer, the Pilgrims, still persevering in prayer and assisted by helpful Indians, reaped a bountiful harvest. As Pilgrim Edward Winslow (later to become the Governor) affirmed, “God be praised, we had a good increase of corn; ... by the goodness of God, we are far from want.” The grateful Pilgrims therefore declared a three-day feast in December 1621 to thank God and to celebrate with their Indian friends.

Ninety Wampanoag Indians joined the fifty Pilgrims for three days of feasting, [friendly competition], and prayer. This celebration and its accompanying activities were the origin of the holiday that Americans now celebrate each November.¹

¹ David Barton, “Celebrating Thanksgiving in America.” Wallbuilders.com

Most of us are probably familiar with the historical origins of the American Thanksgiving holiday. But the idea of giving thanks to God for his benefits goes back thousands of years. The Pilgrims knew that thanksgiving is a biblical virtue, and they practiced that virtue often. Giving thanks to God ought to be a normal part of our lives. We find the command to give thanks to God throughout the Bible. And it's also biblical to set aside special occasions to focus on giving thanks to God for his blessings. Today, I'd like to look at several passages from the Psalms that talk about thanksgiving.

The words "thanks" and "thanksgiving" are found in the Psalms about 30 times in our English translation of the Bible. In the Hebrew language, there is not much difference between "thanks" and "praise." For example, the same Hebrew word (תָּוֵן) translated as "praise" (53x) is translated as "give thanks" (32x). Likewise, another Hebrew word (תְּהַלֵּל) is translated as "thanksgiving" (18x) and as "praise" (6x). So the concepts of praise and thanksgiving are pretty well interchangeable/synonymous in Hebrew thought. We praise God by giving thanks to him.

Let's consider several things the Psalms tell us about thanksgiving.

I. Thank God among the "heathen."

Ps 18:49 *Therefore will I give thanks unto thee, O LORD, among the heathen, and sing praises unto thy name.*

The word for "heathen" (גוֹיִם) simply refers to the Gentile nations, the non-Jewish world. All the nations surrounding Israel had their own gods/idols. They worshipped gods like Baal, Molech, Chemosh, and Dagon. They worshipped the sun, moon, and stars. Israel lived among the heathen. And the psalmist calls upon them to praise God among their heathen neighbors.

In a certain sense, we live among the heathen today. Our culture is becoming more pagan and less Christian all the time. Our nation is quickly turning away from its Christian roots and adopting various forms of idolatry and paganism. So it's not much of an exaggeration to say that we live among a heathen people.

The NT tells us that the unsaved are spiritually dead, aliens and strangers, having no hope and without God (Eph 2:1, 12). And most of the people that we encounter out in the world are like that. Statistics reveal that at best, 1 out of 10 American adults is a genuine Christian; probably even less than that. So it's true that we are surrounded by unbelievers—the heathen.

The psalmist expresses his intent to praise/thank God among unbelievers. We should not be afraid to offer thanksgiving to God even when surrounded by pagans. We might be tempted to be quiet and not say anything when we are around unbelievers. But the psalmist encourages us to express our thanksgiving and praise even when we are among the heathen.

Perhaps one of the best ways to do that is to pray before meals while eating out in public. I hope that prayer before meals is your regular practice, and I hope that you do that even when you are eating out. You don't have to make a big show of it, but a quiet prayer is certainly appropriate wherever you may be before you eat. Thanking God for our food is always appropriate, even if you are surrounded by heathen people.

One way of witnessing/testifying to this dark and dying world is by praising and thanking God publicly, right out there among the heathen. We still have freedom of religion, and we should use it while we can.

Illus.: Occasionally we see athletes praising/thanking God after they have won a championship. I give them credit for thanking God among the heathen.

Note another thing: the words “give thanks” here could also be translated as “confess” (16x in KJV). How willing are you to confess your belief in God when surrounded by unbelievers? It's pretty easy to confess our belief in God at home or at church when we are surrounded by like-minded people. When everyone else is thanking and praising God, it's easy to join in.

But when you are the only Christian around, it can be rather intimidating to take a stand for God or for righteousness. But this is what God calls us to do—express our thanks and praise to God and confess that we believe in God, even when surrounded by unbelievers. May God give us backbone and boldness to confess our belief in God and express our thanks to God even among the heathen.

Do the unbelievers around you know or suspect that you are a Christian? If you are following the direction of the psalmist here—confessing/praising and thanking God publicly—it should be abundantly obvious that you are. Jesus tells us to let our lights shine before men (Mt 5:16).

Quote Spurgeon: Who are the despisers of God that we should stop our mouths for them? We will sing to our God whether they like it or no, and force upon them the knowledge of his goodness. Too much politeness to traitors may be treason to our King.²

Trans: The psalmist in another passage exhorts us, “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so” (Ps 107:2). We should not be ashamed to confess the Lord and even thank and praise him among the heathen. I trust that the unbelievers you interact with regularly see and hear you doing that.

II. Thank God as part of a congregation.

Ps 35:18 *I will give thee thanks in the great congregation: I will praise thee among much people.*

A major part of the Christian life is participating in congregational worship. The biblical expectation is that every Christian is part of a body/assembly/congregation that expresses praise and thanksgiving to God.

It's really not sufficient merely to have a private, personal spiritual life. The Bible commands us to assemble with other Christians regularly for worship and instruction. All Christians ought to be part of a congregation.

In the OT, the people of Israel met on three major occasions/festivals—Passover, the Feast of Weeks/Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. During these great festivals, the Jewish people gathered together for worship and praise. They truly worshipped “in the great congregation.” There would be thousands of people gathered together at these times.

The Bible records other occasions when Israel as a nation gathered to offer praise and thanksgiving to God, such as when David brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem or when Solomon dedicated the temple. Thousands of people would gather as a great congregation to worship God.

² *Treasury of David*

The book of Nehemiah (12:31) records a time when many hundreds gathered on the newly-rebuilt walls of Jerusalem. They marched along the walls expressing their thanks and praise to God.

Today, we don't observe the Jewish festivals, gather at the temple, or march around on city walls. But we can praise God in the congregation with other people. Congregational worship is a biblical pattern in which every believer should participate. We should join our voices together in praise and thanksgiving to God.

Congregational thanksgiving ought to be a normal, regular part of our lives, not just on the Thanksgiving holiday, and not just at Christmas. The Bible warns us not to forsake the assembly of believers (Heb 10:25). Corporate worship for Christians is very important. We need to be part of a congregation as it worships the Lord.

Trans: The psalmist in another passage said, "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'" (Ps 122:1). That ought to be our attitude as well. The prospect of thanking and praising God as part of a congregation should fill us with joy, as it did the psalmist. We should not neglect this privilege and responsibility.

III. Thank God as a testimony to "all generations."

Ps 79:13 *So we thy people and sheep of thy pasture will give thee thanks for ever: we will shew forth thy praise to all generations.*

The psalmist expresses his desire that one generation after another would give thanks to God and "show forth" his praise.

The Hebrew text says, literally, "to generation and generation." That is, God expects each generation of believers to pass along the faith to the next generation. Cf. Deut 6:6-7.

We know that some people don't even try to pass the faith on to the next generation. E.g., at the beginning of the book of Judges, it says "another generation arose that knew not the Lord" (Jud 2:10). The book of Judges is filled with chaos and irregularities because every person was doing whatever was right in his own eyes instead of following God's law. How could a whole generation arise without knowing the Lord? Because the previous generation failed to pass along the faith.

The biblical expectation is that "One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts" (Ps 145:4). Christian parents are obligated to raise their children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). Perhaps the greatest task of Christian parents is to pass along the faith to the next generation. Our desire should be that extended generations of our families would lift up their voices together in unified praise and thanksgiving to God.

Deut 7:9 Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he [is] God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations;

Unfortunately, sometimes families don't do such a great job in passing the faith along to the next generation. In some cases, in spite of their best efforts, the next generation simply does not adopt the faith.

Passing the faith along to the next generation does not happen automatically. Sometimes, even those who are intentionally trying to pass the faith along fail to do so. We can't force our children to be saved or guarantee that they will keep the faith. But we can make every effort to see that they accept the faith and pass it along to the succeeding generations.

Trans: The holiday of Thanksgiving is a wonderful time to affirm and pass along the faith. I hope that you make time during your Thanksgiving holiday to express thanks to God as a family. This is a teaching moment. Teach the next generations how important it is to be thankful to God for all of his blessings.

IV. Thank God with music.

Ps 30:4 Sing unto the LORD, O ye saints of his, and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness.

Ps 69:30 *I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving.*

Ps 92:1 *It is a good thing to give thanks unto the LORD, and to sing praises unto thy name, O most High:*

Ps 147:7 *Sing unto the LORD with thanksgiving; sing praise upon the harp unto our God:*

The Book of Psalms is the hymnal of the Hebrew people. Each psalm is actually a song. The people of Israel sang these psalms; most of them were set to music and used at various times during the festivals and religious events in Israel.

A couple of examples:

1 Chron 15:16 *David spoke to the leaders of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers accompanied by instruments of music, stringed instruments, harps, and cymbals, by raising the voice with resounding joy.*

2 Chron 5:13 *... when the trumpeters and singers [were] as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the LORD, saying: "For He is good, For His mercy endures forever," that the house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud,*

So it should not surprise us that music is a way of expressing thanks. Giving thanks to God through music is a very biblical thing to do. Even if you can't sing very well, you can still "make a joyful noise to the Lord." You can still lift up your voice in praise and thanksgiving to God through music.

Notice that these psalms include a strong invitation if not a command to participate in musical worship. "Sing unto the Lord" is an imperative/command. God expects his people—"O ye saints of his" (Ps 30:4)—to participate in praise and thanksgiving through music.

Thanksgiving ought to be filled with musical expressions of thanks and praise to God for all he's done for us.

These verses in the Psalms tell us some important things about offering thanks to God. I trust that this Thanksgiving season, we'll remember these principles. Whether we join with a great congregation or just with a small group, I hope that we will all take time to thank and praise God for his goodness and mercy toward us.